

Research Brief

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Economic Conditions of Head Start Families: Connections with Social Supports and Child and Family Well-Being

Key Findings

- Over half (54 percent) of parents* with children in Head Start report at least one material hardship (inability to pay for basic material needs such as rent, utility bills, medical care, or food), and almost as many (40 percent) report at least one financial strain (feeling like they cannot afford daily life or needs).
- Other economic factors shape whether parents report material hardship or financial strain. Parents in households above 130 percent of the federal poverty threshold are less likely to report at least one material hardship or financial strain than households near poverty or in poverty. Parents in households with two parents who work full-time are less likely to report at least one material hardship or financial strain than other parents. Further, access to more social supports is important because it shapes parents' experiences with economic conditions.
- Most parents report having access to social supports, but parents in households above the federal poverty threshold can more frequently obtain a loan from friends or family in an emergency. Parents with more social supports also report fewer material hardships and financial strains.
- Access to more social supports buffers the link between poverty and material hardship and financial strain.
- Financial strains and material hardships are associated with parent well-being. Parents with financial strains or material hardships have more depressive symptoms than parents without financial strains or material hardships.
- Material hardships can lead to stressful home conditions and are associated with some aspects of children's well-being. Children whose parents report material hardships are more likely to have lower executive function scores (self-regulation), fewer social skills (cooperative behavior), poorer receptive vocabulary (number of words they understand), and poorer physical health. Material hardships and financial strains are not associated with children's approaches to learning or problem behaviors. They are also not associated with families' engagement in learning activities.
- Social support is associated with fewer parent depressive symptoms and better child physical health. Social support weakens the association between material hardship and financial strain and parent depressive symptoms and between material hardship and child physical health and receptive vocabulary.

* All estimates in this brief are at the child level and should be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents and not children's parents, throughout the brief. Weighted estimates from parent-reported data are nationally representative of children in Head Start.

Head Start is a national program that helps young children from families with low incomes get ready to succeed in school. It does this by working to promote their early learning and health and their families' well-being, such as housing stability, continuing education, and financial security (Administration for Children and Families 2020). Research shows that income is an important predictor of child and family well-being. Children living in poverty are more likely than children from higher-income homes to have poor cognitive and behavioral outcomes, such as a more limited vocabulary and more withdrawn, aggressive, and anxious behaviors (Berger et al. 2009). Poverty is not just related to cognitive and behavioral outcomes. When children live in poverty, their health is more likely to be poor (Glied and Oellerich 2014), with asthma and obesity at higher levels, for example. And compared with parents whose incomes are higher, parents living in poverty report more symptoms of depression, such as sadness and hopelessness (McDonald et al. 2020), and they use fewer positive parenting practices (Russell et al. 2008).

Other aspects of a family's economic condition are also linked to the well-being of children and families. These include material hardship (or lack of access to basic material needs) and financial strain (or perceived lack of money for daily life). For example, children living in a household that experiences material hardship also have greater rates of problem behaviors, such as anger and defiance (Zilaniawala and Pilkauskas 2012). Adults who experience financial strain also tend to have poor mental health (Raver et al. 2015).

Research shows that material hardship and financial strain may measure economic conditions better than poverty alone. Many families experience poverty for short periods of time but experience material hardships for much longer (Iceland and Bauman 2007). More children in the United States experience material hardship than poverty, which could relate to how poverty is measured (Hutto et al. 2011; Rodems and Shaefer 2020). Measuring income alone also may not capture the frequency or depth of families' material needs. Although Head Start primarily serves children living in poverty, few children have parents who report feeling they do not have enough money for daily life (Tarullo et al. 2017).

Key Constructs Examined

- / **Household poverty level** uses annual household income relative to the number of people in the household to determine where a household falls relative to the federal poverty level. For example, we define a household below 50 percent of the federal poverty threshold as living in deep poverty. 100 percent of the federal poverty threshold for a household of four in 2018 was \$25,701.
- / **Material hardship** means an inability to pay for basic material needs (Rodems and Shaefer 2020). There are different kinds of material hardship. The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 2019) measures housing insecurity (inability to pay rent or mortgage); lack of basic utilities (inability to pay for utilities, such as water or gas); unmet medical needs (inability to pay for necessary medical care); and food insecurity (inability to pay for food or meals).
- / **Financial strain** is the perception of not having enough money to afford daily life or needs (Adams et al. 2016). FACES asks parents four questions about the extent to which parents feel they do not have enough money to afford the kind of home, clothing, food, and medical care they need (Conger et al. 1993; Raver et al. 2013).
- / **Social support** is the type of help people believe they can get from others. We examine three types of social support: whether parents (1) have someone to go to for a meal if they have problems buying food, (2) have family or friends who will loan them cash in an emergency, and (3) can find someone to provide their family a place to live if they need somewhere to stay. These supports align with the items used to measure material hardship—housing insecurity, material hardship broadly, and food insecurity.
- / **Child well-being** includes how a child approaches learning (such as concentration and eagerness to learn), executive function (self-regulation skills), social skills (such as cooperative behaviors), problem behaviors (such as aggression and hyperactivity), receptive vocabulary (how many words a child understands), and physical health.
- / **Family well-being** includes parents' depressive symptoms (such as feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or restlessness) and the family's involvement in learning activities (such as playing games with the child or telling the child stories). ▲

Although it is important to understand the link between a household's economic conditions and child and family well-being, it is also important to understand how much the social support that a household receives changes this link. Social supports may weaken the extent to which material hardship and financial strain are associated with child and family well-being. In families with more social support, the well-being of parents and children tends to be better (McDonald et al. 2020; Small 2009).

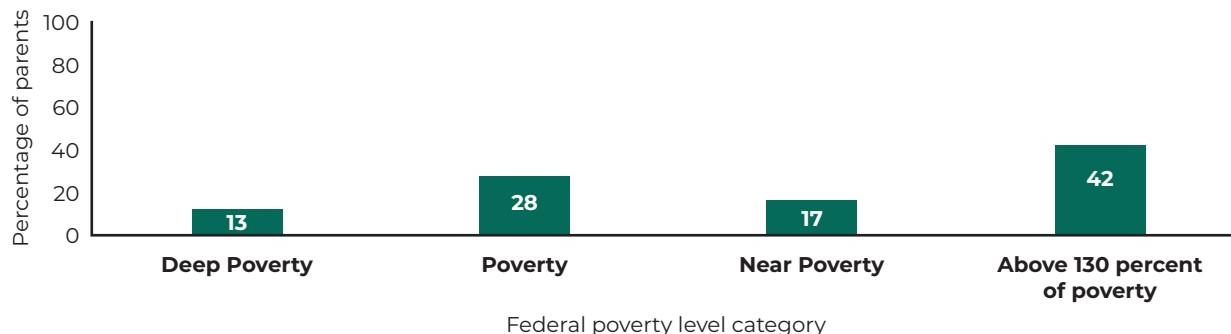
This brief discusses the material hardships and financial strains that families may face, as well as the social supports that may help them avoid the adverse links between economic conditions and child and family well-being. We would expect that social supports promote family and child well-being and decrease a household's material hardship and financial strain (Henly et al. 2005; Turner 1981).

In this brief, we analyze¹ fall 2019 data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 2019) to understand the prevalence of material hardship, financial strain, and social support among Head Start families. We explore (1) whether material hardship and financial strain are better predictors of child and family well-being than poverty alone and (2) whether social support weakens the adverse association between material hardship and financial strain and child and family well-being.

How often do parents report material hardship and financial strain? Are parents more likely to report material hardships and financial strains if they are living in poverty or if their household does not have two working parents?

While there are many ways to measure family economic conditions, poverty measures different conditions than do material hardship and financial strain. Although the majority of Head Start parents live in deep poverty, in poverty, or near poverty (based on household income in the last 12 months) (Exhibit 1), their reports of material hardship and financial strain differ. More than half of parents report experiencing material hardship in the last 12 months (Exhibit 2) and less than half report financial strain (Exhibit 3) at the time of the survey. Parents in households above 130 percent of poverty are less likely than parents near poverty and in poverty to report at least one material hardship (Exhibit 4) or financial strain (Exhibit 5).² Further, Head Start parents in households with two parents working full-time are less likely to report at least one material hardship (Exhibit 6) or financial strain (Exhibit 7) than parents in many other types of households.

Exhibit 1. The majority of Head Start parents live at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level

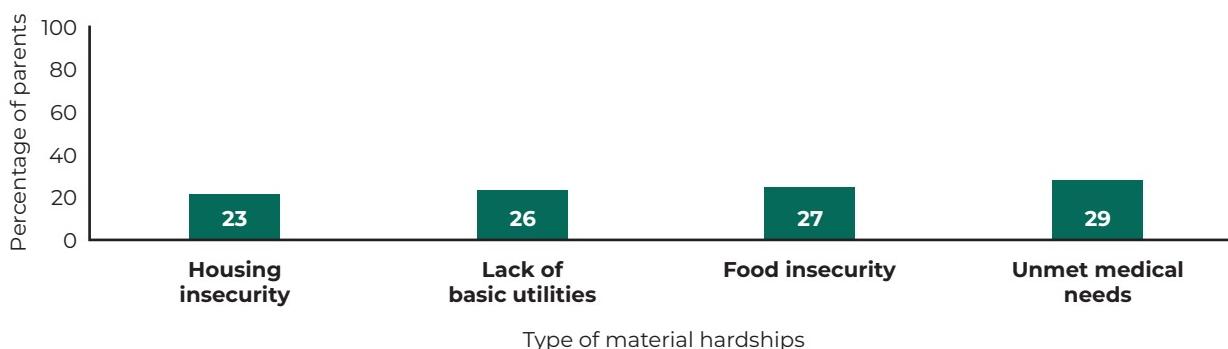


Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings. Household poverty level is based on household income in the last 12 months. Deep poverty represents parents in households that are below 50 percent of the poverty level; poverty represents parents in households that are 50 to 100 percent of the poverty level; near poverty represents parents in households that are 101 to 130 percent of the poverty level; and above 130 percent of poverty represents parents in households that are above 130 percent of the poverty level. Data are drawn from Table A.1 in the accompanying appendix.

While most Head Start parents do not live above 130 percent of poverty, 42 percent do (Exhibit 1) (see technical appendix for tables on all statistics presented throughout the brief). This may reflect how FACES measures income. FACES uses household income, and not family income (which is used to determine

Head Start eligibility, to capture the entirety of the resources available to children at home. Household income captures the income of all members of the same household, but family income captures only the reported income of the child's parents or legal guardians (see technical appendix for details).

Exhibit 2. About one-quarter of Head Start parents report experiencing each type of material hardship in the past 12 months

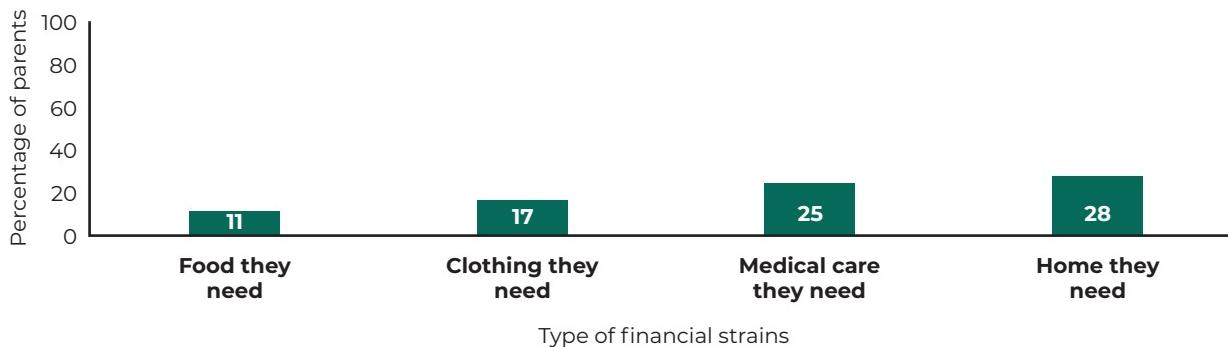
Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.2 in the accompanying appendix.

When looking at all types of material hardship, over half (54 percent) of Head Start parents report at least one material hardship in the last 12 months, defined as the inability to pay for basic material

needs (Appendix Table A.2). Similar percentages of parents report each type of material hardship—ranging from 23 to 29 percent (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 3. Approximately one-tenth to one-quarter of Head Start parents report experiencing some form of financial strain

Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

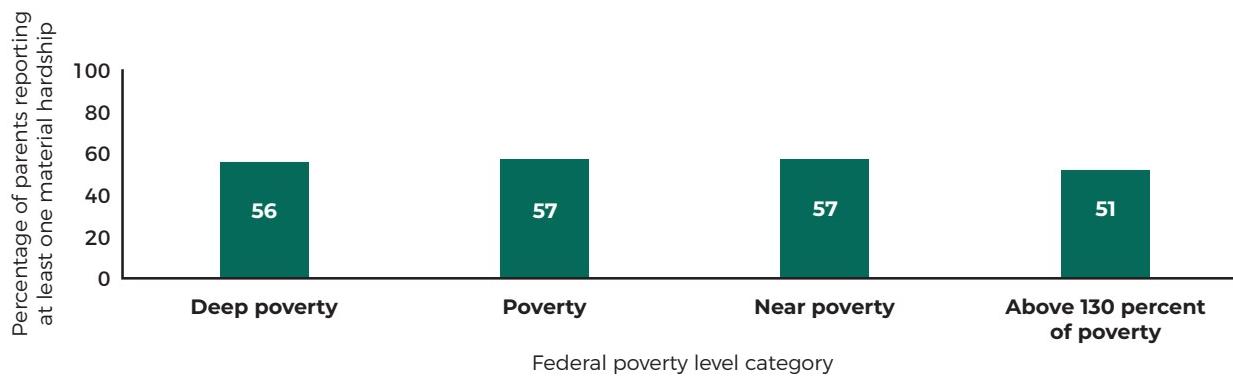
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.3 in the accompanying appendix.

Forty percent of Head Start parents report at least one financial strain, defined as feeling like they cannot afford daily life or needs. Although the individual types of financial strain can overlap with material hardship, financial strain also measures unique

factors such as the ability to afford clothing. Parents most often report feeling like they do not have enough money to afford the home they need (28 percent) or the medical care they need (25 percent) (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 4. Head Start parents in households above 130 percent of the poverty level are less likely to report experiencing at least one material hardship than those in households in poverty or near poverty



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

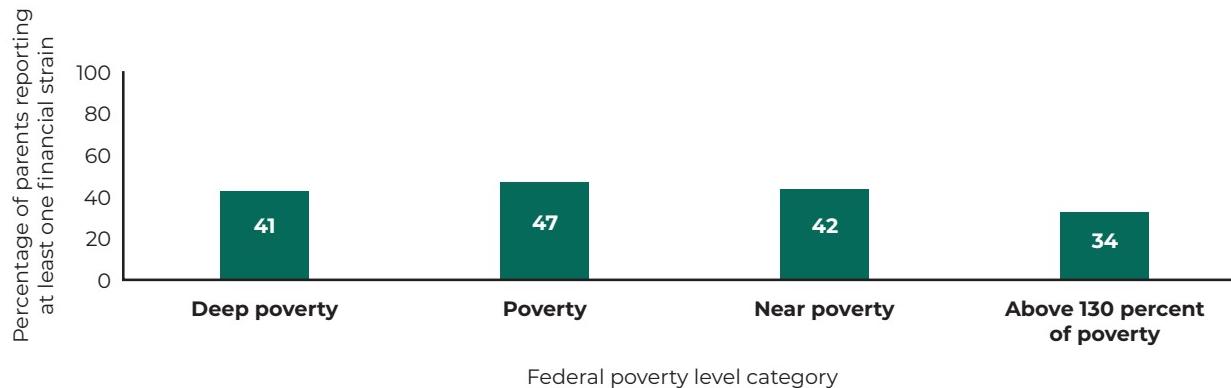
Household poverty level is based on household income in the last 12 months. Deep poverty represents parents in households that are below 50 percent of the poverty level; poverty represents parents in households that are 50 to 100 percent of the poverty level; near poverty represents parents in households that are 101 to 130 percent of the poverty level; and above 130 percent of poverty represents parents in households that are above 130 percent of the poverty level.

Data are drawn from Table A.4 in the accompanying appendix.

Material hardship differs by poverty level in two notable ways (Exhibit 4). Parents in households above 130 percent of poverty are less likely to report at least one material hardship than parents living in poverty (50 percent to 100 percent) or near poverty

(101 percent to 130 percent). Unexpectedly, they are equally as likely as parents living in households in deep poverty (less than 50 percent) to report material hardships.

Exhibit 5. Head Start parents in households above 130 percent of the poverty level are less likely to report at least one financial strain than other parents in households in poverty or near poverty



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

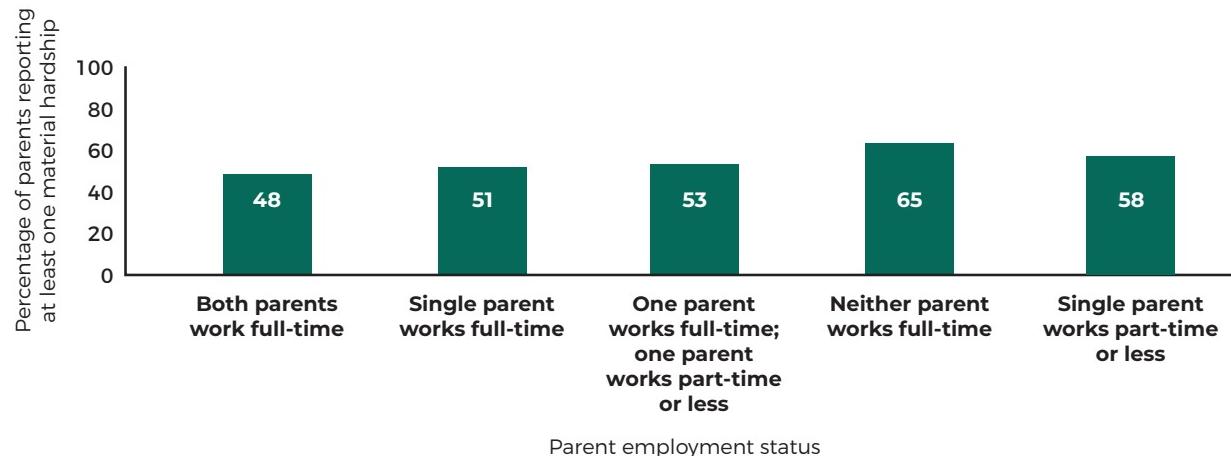
Household poverty level is based on household income in the last 12 months. Deep poverty represents parents in households that are below 50 percent of the poverty level; poverty represents parents in households that are 50 to 100 percent of the poverty level; near poverty represents parents in households that are 101 to 130 percent of the poverty level; and above 130 percent of poverty represents parents in households that are above 130 percent of the poverty level.

Data are drawn from Table A.6 in the accompanying appendix.

In general, as a household's percentage of the poverty level increases, fewer Head Start parents report financial strains (Exhibit 5). There is one exception to this pattern—parents living in deep

poverty. The percentage of parents in deep poverty reporting financial strains does not differ from the percentage of parents at any of the higher poverty levels who do so.

Exhibit 6. Head Start parents in households with two full-time working parents are less likely to report experiencing at least one material hardship than other parents



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

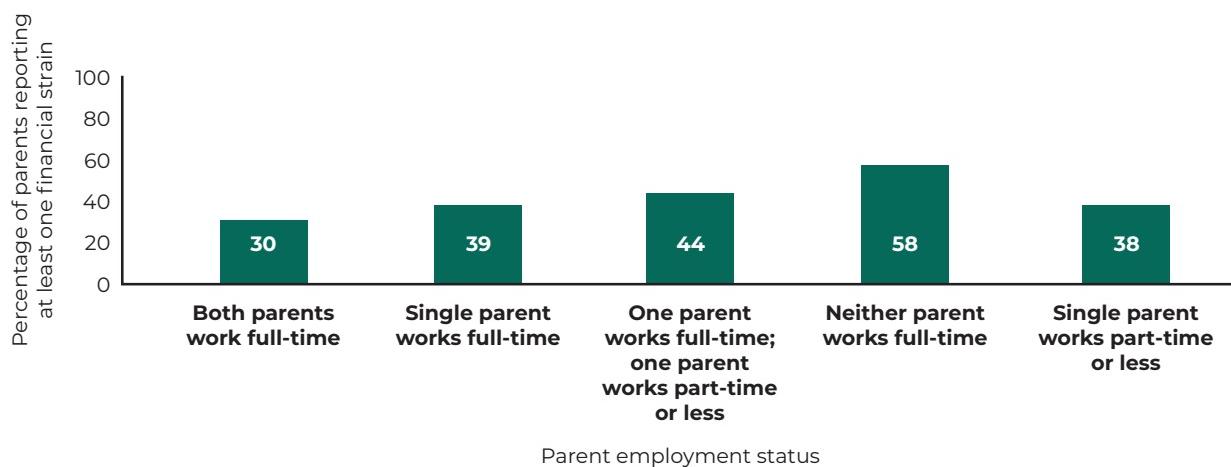
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.5 in the accompanying appendix.

Head Start parents in households with two parents who work full-time report fewer material hardships than other parents, except those in households in which a single parent works full-time (Appendix Table A.5). Similarly, parents in households with two parents who work full-time are also less likely

to experience at least one material hardship than those in other types of households, except households in which a single parent works full-time (Exhibit 6). Parents in two-parent households with neither parent working full-time are the most likely to report material hardships.

Exhibit 7. Head Start parents in households with two full-time working parents are less likely to report at least one financial strain than other parents



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.7 in the accompanying appendix.

Head Start parents in households with neither parent working full-time are the most likely to report at least one financial strain (Appendix Table A.7). Additionally, parents in households with neither parent working full-time report more financial strains than parents in households with a single parent working either full-time or part-time or less. Parents in households with two parents who

work full-time report fewer financial strains than other two-parent homes. Parents in households with two parents who work full-time also are less likely to report at least one financial strain than those in households with one parent working full-time, with one parent working part-time or less, or with neither parent working full-time (Exhibit 7).

What kinds of social supports can parents turn to? Do parents who live in poverty report different social supports than those who do not live in poverty?

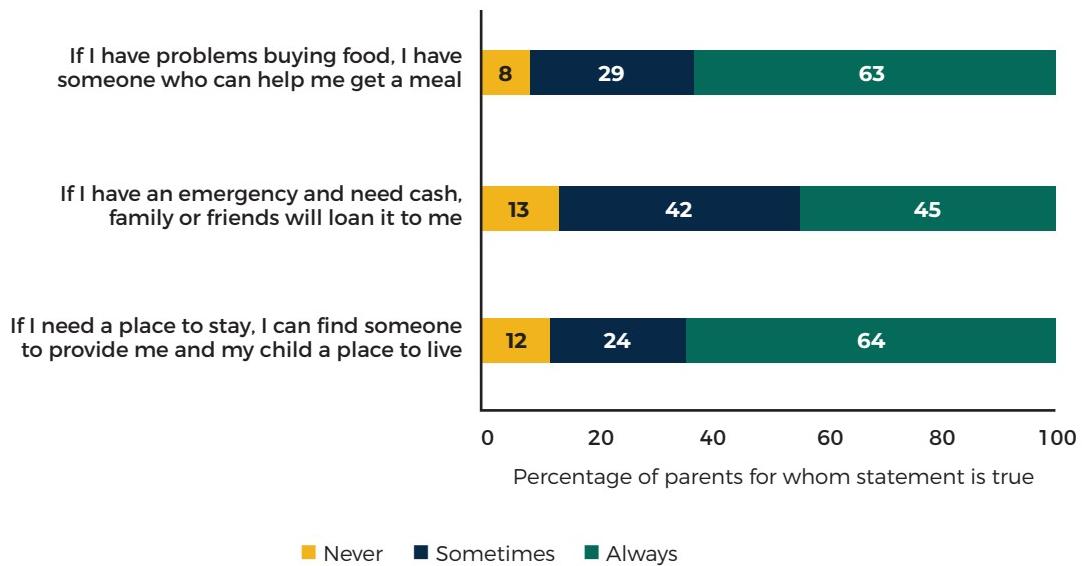
The majority of Head Start parents have access to social supports. Nearly all parents can sometimes or always access the three types of social support we measure: (1) having someone to go to for a meal, (2) getting a loan from family or friends in an emergency, and (3) finding a place to stay (Exhibit 8). There are differences by household poverty in access to some social supports (Exhibit 9).

Seventy-five percent of parents can always access at least one of these types of support, and 40 percent can always access all three types of support (Appendix Table A.8).

Head Start parents in households above 130 percent of poverty are more likely than those at lower poverty levels to report that they can always get a loan from friends or family in an emergency (Exhibit 9). The ability to find a place to stay or to get a meal is not different for parents in households at different poverty levels.

There are no differences in the ability to find a place to stay, obtain a loan, or receive a meal by parent employment status (Appendix Table A.10).

Exhibit 8. Most Head Start parents report access to social supports when needed

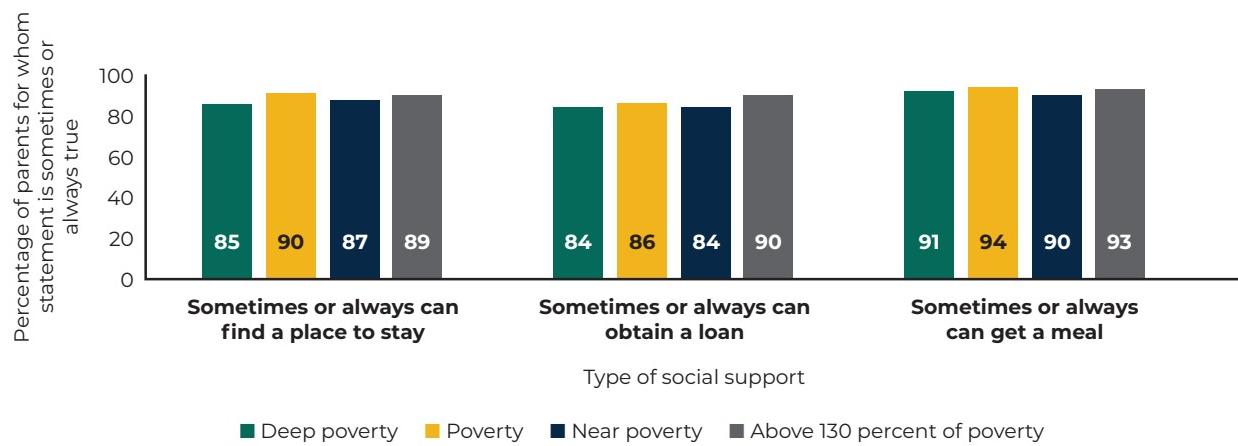


Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.8 in the accompanying appendix.

Exhibit 9. Head Start parents in households at higher percentages of the federal poverty level are more able to obtain a loan in an emergency



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Household poverty level is based on household income in the last 12 months. Deep poverty represents parents in households that are below 50 percent of the poverty level; poverty represents parents in households that are 50 to 100 percent of the poverty level; near poverty represents parents in households that are 101 to 130 percent of the poverty level; and above 130 percent of poverty represents parents in households that are above 130 percent of the poverty level. Data are drawn from Table A.9 in the accompanying appendix.

Do parents with more social supports report fewer material hardships and financial strains?

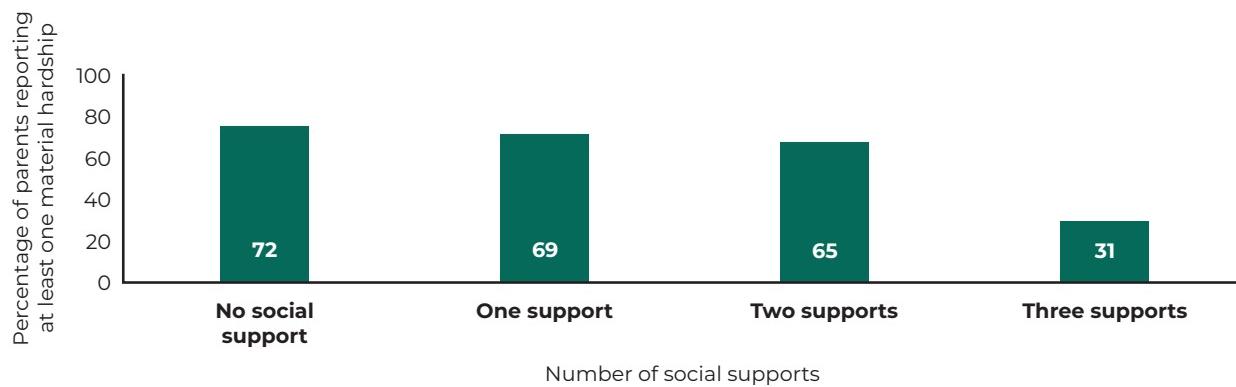
Head Start parents with more social supports are less likely to report material hardships (Exhibit 10) and financial strains (Exhibit 11) than parents with fewer social supports.

As the number of social supports increases, fewer Head Start parents report experiencing material hardships (Exhibit 10). Among parents who report all three social supports, approximately one-third report material hardships. When considering the specific types of social supports—housing, financial, and food—parents who have each type of support

are less likely to report experiencing material hardships (Appendix Tables A.16-A.18).

As the number of social supports increases, fewer Head Start parents report at least one financial strain (Exhibit 11). On average, parents who can access all three supports report experiencing less than one financial strain, whereas those with no, one, or two social supports report one or more financial strains (Appendix Table A.11).

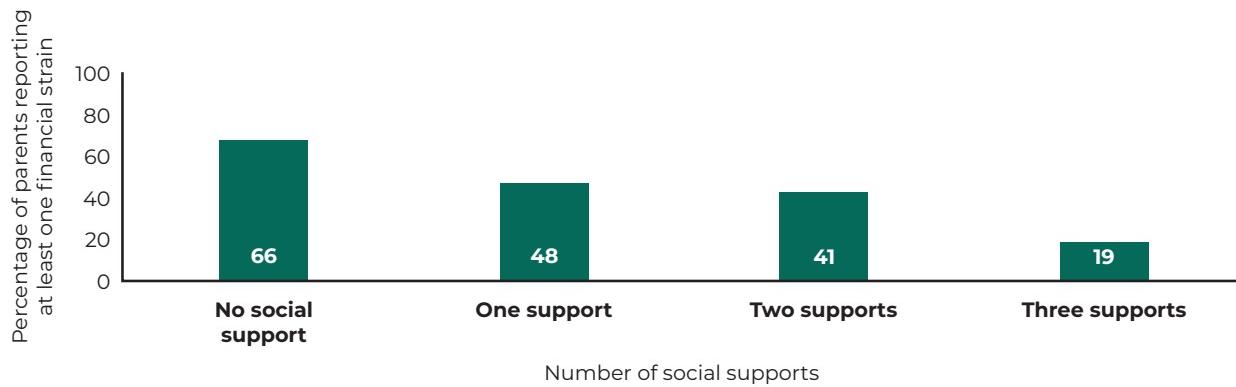
When considering the specific types of social supports—housing, financial, and food—parents who have each type of support are less likely to report financial strains and, on average, report fewer financial strains (Appendix Tables A.12-A.14).

Exhibit 10. Head Start parents who report more social supports are less likely to report experiencing at least one material hardship

Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.15 in the accompanying appendix.

Exhibit 11. Head Start parents who report more social supports are less likely to experience at least one financial strain

Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019. All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.11 in the accompanying appendix.

Do more social supports buffer the link between poverty and material hardship and financial strain?

As Head Start parents living in poverty are more likely to experience material hardship and financial strain (Exhibits 4 and 5), social support may play an important role in weakening this association.

We found that in cases where parents report more social supports, the link between poverty and material hardship and financial strain no longer exists (Appendix Tables A.19-A.20).

Results suggest that poverty level measures a different aspect of economic conditions than material hardship and financial strain do. We find

no link between poverty and material hardship and financial strain, when taking into account the number of social supports parents can access.

We also explored whether the associations between poverty and material hardship and financial strain differ for Head Start parents with more social support versus parents with less social support (Appendix Tables A.19-A.20). We did not find any evidence of such differences.

Do financial strain and material hardship predict child and family well-being, after accounting for poverty?

After accounting for poverty, financial strain and material hardship are both associated with some aspects of parent well-being, but only material hardship is associated with child well-being (Appendix Tables A.21-A.28).

Head Start parents with financial strains and material hardships report more depressive symptoms than parents without financial strains or material hardships. Hardships tend to accumulate so that additional hardships are linked with additional increases in depressive symptoms. Parents who live in households at higher percentages of the poverty level report fewer depressive symptoms. This is true even when we take financial strain and material hardship into account. These results indicate that poverty level, material hardship, and financial strain all uniquely predict parents' depressive symptoms.

Material hardships are associated with some aspects of child well-being. Head Start children whose parents report material hardships have lower executive function scores (self-regulation), fewer social skills (cooperative behavior), poorer receptive vocabulary (number of words they understand), and poorer physical health. Material hardships accumulate such that additional hardships are linked with additional decreases in children's executive function, social skills, receptive vocabulary, and the probability of the child being in good physical health. These results are consistent even when we take financial strain and poverty level into account.

Material hardship, financial strain, and poverty are not associated with children's approaches to learning (such as concentration and eagerness to learn) or problem behaviors (such as aggression and hyperactivity). They are also not associated with families' engagement in learning activities.

Are social supports associated with child and family well-being? For parents with more social supports, is there a weaker link between material hardship and financial strain and child and family well-being?

Social support is associated with some aspects of child and family well-being, but there are no differences between Head Start parents with more social support as compared to Head Start parents with less social support when considering the link between material hardship and financial strain and child and family well-being (Appendix Tables A.21-A.28).

Having more social supports predicts two child and family well-being outcomes: parents' depressive symptoms and child physical health. Head Start parents with more social supports report fewer depressive symptoms, and children whose parents report more social supports are physically healthier than children whose parents have less social support. Social support is not associated with children's approaches to learning, executive function, social skills, problem behaviors, or receptive vocabulary skills. It is also not associated with families' engagement in learning activities.

We also examined whether social support weakens the association between material hardship and financial strain and child and family well-being. When we account for social support (Appendix Table A.21), this weakens the association between material hardship and financial strain and parents' depressive symptoms. Similarly, when we account for social support, this weakens the association between material hardship and child physical health (Appendix Table A.28) as well as the association between material hardship and receptive vocabulary,

such that there is no longer an association between these variables (Appendix Table A.27). However, even after accounting for social support, material hardship continues to be associated with children's executive function and social skills.

Finally, we also explored whether links between financial strain and material hardship and child and family well-being are weaker for families with more social support (Appendix Tables A.21-A.28). We did not find any evidence that the way material hardship or financial strain may be associated with well-being differs between parents with more social supports and parents with fewer social supports.

Limitations

In this brief, we identified aspects of economic conditions that link to child and family well-being. Although we accounted for several child, parent, and household characteristics that we expected to relate to child and family well-being, some potentially important ones may not have been included, such as children's experiences in the Head Start program and the characteristics of the program. In addition, this analysis used data on material hardship and financial strain from a single time point at the beginning of the program year. We did not examine whether or how these aspects of economic conditions may have changed during the program year. We also did not have information from parents about the social and material supports that Head Start provided. FACES 2014 found that a small share of parents reported receiving support from Head Start for services that might buffer the impact of material hardship and financial strain more directly than the social supports analyzed in this brief (Aikens et al. 2017). Including such factors in the analyses could have weakened the associations between social supports and the outcomes we examined.

Conclusions and implications

Results from our analysis point to factors that programs may want to consider to best serve families, particularly parents' access to social supports. Material hardship and financial strain are also highlighted as part of program community needs assessments (National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations 2020), so likely already on the minds of programs. While many children and parents in Head Start experience material hardship and financial strain, social supports can play an important role in buffering them from poor well-being. Based on the current findings, parents experiencing depressive symptoms or children in poor physical health may benefit from social supports, including the ability to find a place to stay, obtain a loan, or receive a meal, as well as additional supports, such as mental health resources or referrals. More broadly, given social supports for material needs have a positive effect, program efforts, such as connecting families to housing, may be one way to improve well-being beyond meeting the immediate need. Head Start places an emphasis on providing a sense of community for parents and strengthening their sources of support (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement 2013). This may be another avenue to consider for supporting families' access to supports. In addition, programs might consider broader approaches to assess economic conditions or financial resources as part of identifying or enrolling families. The current findings suggest that poverty level, material hardship, and financial strain provide unique information about families' economic conditions.

Endnotes

¹ Detailed information on the methods and measurement used in this analysis can be found in the technical appendix.

² We report only statistically significant findings at the $p \leq .05$ level in this narrative, focusing on those with a clear pattern for interpretation. The technical appendix includes the details on all analytic findings, including those not described in this narrative.

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Head Start FACES

This research brief draws upon the fall 2019 data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2019. FACES provides information at the national level about Head Start programs, centers, and classrooms as well as the children and families that Head Start serves.

Head Start is a national program that helps young children from families with low incomes get ready to succeed in school. It does this by working to promote early learning, health, and family well-being. Head Start connects families with medical, dental, and mental health services to ensure that their children are receiving the services they need to develop well. Head Start not only involves parents in their children's learning and development but also supports parents' own goals, such as stable housing, continuing education, and financial security (Administration for Children and Families 2020). Head Start operates by providing grants to local public and private, nonprofit and for-profit agencies that deliver comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and their families.

Sample

For FACES 2019, we selected a sample of Head Start programs from the 2017–2018 Head Start Program Information Report, with two centers per program and two classrooms per center. Within each classroom, we randomly selected 12 children for the study. In total, 59 programs, 115 centers, 221 classrooms, and 2,260 children participated in the study in fall 2019. More information on the study methodology and the measurement in FACES 2019 is available in the FACES Fall 2019 Data Tables and Study Design Report (Kopack Klein et al. 2021).

See the technical appendix for more details about the measures used, treatment of missing data, analytic models, full results, and sensitivity analyses.

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